



Just between you and me,  
I admit it: sometimes I bribe  
my children.

At the moment, my daughter is three years old and on the shy side, and often struggles when we leave her in playtime at church. We've tried setting firm boundaries. Tears. We've tried pleading. Tears. We've tried one parent, or the other parent, or both. Tears. We've tried staying for a few minutes then slipping out, and... well, you guessed it.

This makes it more frustrating that the few times we've decided to offer a piece of chocolate or an episode of her favourite show in the event that she behaves, she's been a saint every time. You can say this about bribery: it works. Well, at least until the bribe runs out.


I imagine something similar was going through the minds of the writers of 'Santa Claus is Coming to Town'.<sup>1</sup> You know, that Christmas song where Santa is watching all the children carefully, all the time—when they're sleeping and when they're awake—so that he knows which ones deserve presents. (If you think about it too much, Santa starts to seem a bit creepy.)

If you're going to give your children presents at Christmas time, and you're going to say those presents are from Santa, why not add a bit of bribery into the mix? Apparently, Santa



<sup>1</sup> JF Cootes and H Gillespie, 1934.






knows if you've been naughty or nice, and if you're naughty—no presents. If you're nice, you get presents. (Let's not talk about the other ten months of the year when this reward/threat isn't hanging over our children's little heads.)

But it's not only Santa who works this way; our entire society works this way. You study harder, you get higher marks. You work harder, you get more money. You pay more money, you can buy a better house. It's all a kind of 'Santa thinking'.

And when it comes to God, many people think he operates in the same way: if you're nice, you go to heaven; if you're naughty, you don't. But when you read the Bible, there's one big problem with 'Santa thinking': God doesn't deal with us like Santa Claus does.

Because here's the one thing you might not know about Christianity, the one thing upon which all Christians depend: *God isn't impressed by how good you've been.*

Or, to put it another way, God loves you *no matter how bad you've been.*



And this love isn't based on ignorance. God knows, truly knows, what you've done, whether you've been naughty, nice, good or bad. He knows everything you've said and done and thought. He knows your moments of intense hatred, the words you've said in anger, your lies that might have been accepted by everybody else.

This love of God that looks past the wrong we have done is called 'grace'. It's the same grace as in the song 'Amazing Grace':





# GRACE



Amazing grace, how sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me...<sup>2</sup>

Jesus—the baby born at Christmas—grew up to become a preacher and teacher, and one of the stories he told illustrates grace perfectly. Here’s the story (in my own words).<sup>3</sup>

Once there was a man who had two sons, and the younger son said to his father, “Give me my inheritance”. Understand that this was a shocking thing to do: the son was basically saying that the father was as good as dead to him. But the father agreed, and gave half his assets to his son.

This son then went to another country and spent the money in the ways you might imagine that a young man with lots of money and no responsibility would. In time, the money was gone and he was left with nothing but bad memories and regret.

In need of money, the only job he could get was feeding pigs. And yet he looked longingly at the food the pigs ate: they ate better than him.

He realized how far he’d fallen. He said to himself, “I will go to my father, and say ‘I have wronged you and I am sorry. I’m not worthy of being called your son. But please at least take me in as a servant.’”

And so he made the long trip back to his father’s property, accompanied only by regret and shame.

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2 J Newton, 1779.

3 You can read the story yourself in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15, verses 11-24.



And yet when his father saw him, he loved him, and at the first sight of him, the father ran to the son and embraced him.

The son began his prepared speech: “I have wronged you, and I’m not worthy of being called your son—”

But his father interrupted: “Servants, bring me my best robe and put it on him. Dress him well. Let us feast tonight and celebrate, for my son was dead and is alive again. He was lost and now is found.”

In this story, Jesus is saying that *we* are that son. We are the ones who have not done what we ought to do. We have not given the honour and respect we owe to the God who created us. Instead, we treat God as if he were as good as dead. We deserve nothing from God.

And yet Jesus says that if we come back and say sorry to God, we are forgiven. The past is wiped clean. He treats us as sons, not slaves.

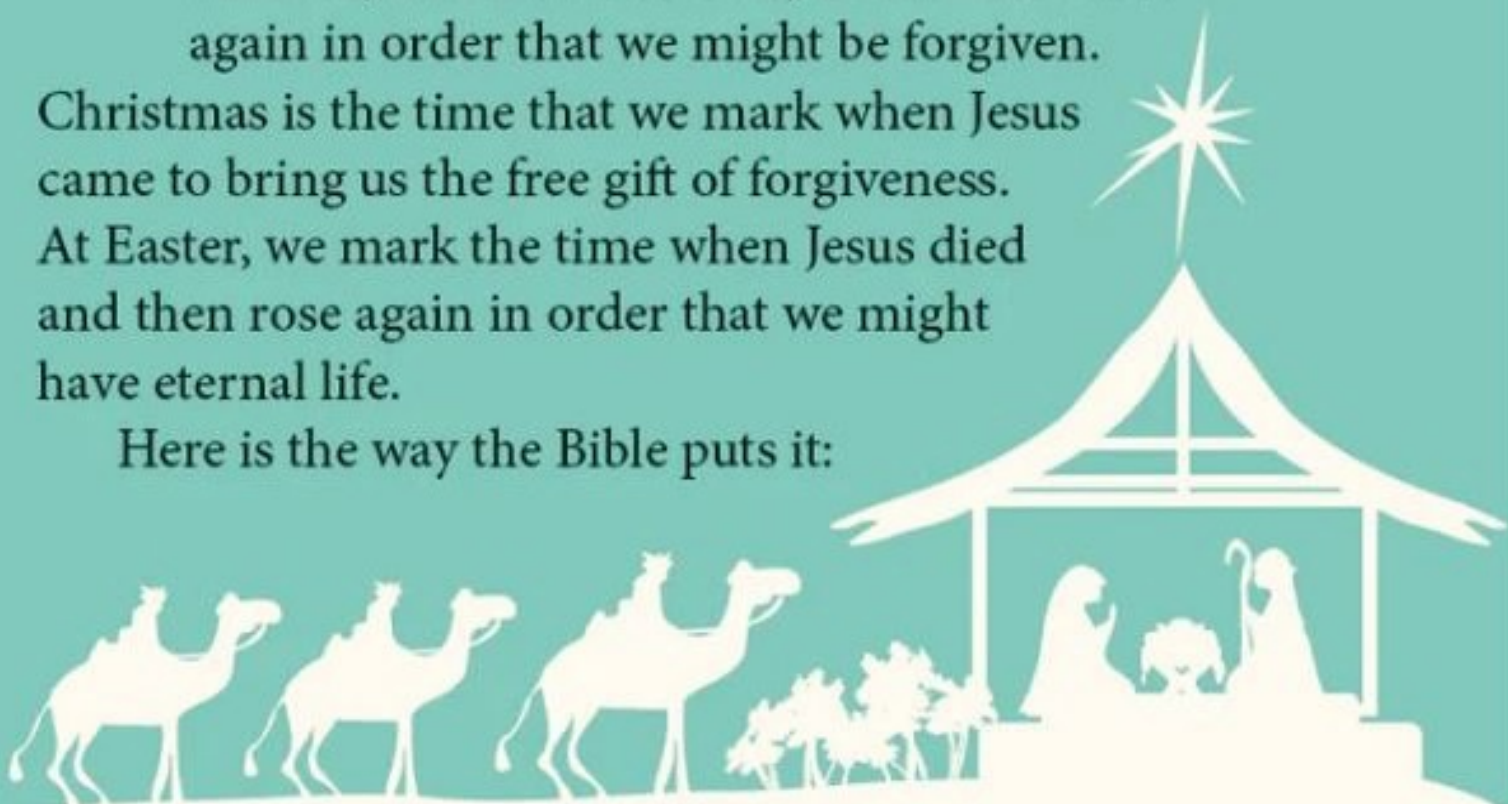
And we know that we can trust what Jesus says about this, for two reasons:

- because he was God’s true Son
- because, as the Son of God, he died and rose again in order that we might be forgiven.



Christmas is the time that we mark when Jesus came to bring us the free gift of forgiveness.

At Easter, we mark the time when Jesus died and then rose again in order that we might have eternal life.

Here is the way the Bible puts it:







But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. (Ephesians 2:4-5)

You too can know that new life and salvation this Christmas, no matter how many times you've been to church; no matter what you've done; no matter who you are. No matter how naughty or nice you've been, God offers you the gift of forgiveness and life through his Son.

If you're interested in finding out more, why not read through the Gospel of Luke<sup>4</sup> yourself, or talk to the person who gave you this leaflet.

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4 The Gospel of Luke is one of the four biographies of Jesus' life that are contained in the New Testament in the Bible. You can read it online here: [bit.ly/thegospelofluke](http://bit.ly/thegospelofluke)

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